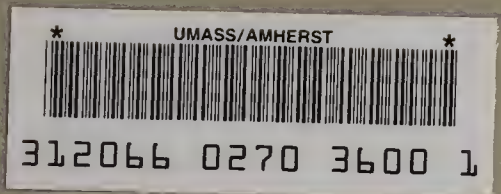


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**EVALUATION OF THE  
EFFECTIVENESS OF  
VOCATIONAL SYSTEMS IN  
ACHIEVING THEIR  
PURPOSES**

**Executive Summary**

Mary Ann Millsap and  
Bonnie Nutt-Powell

July 1987

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Prepared for:

The Massachusetts State Council  
on Vocational Education  
State House  
Room 51  
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 Contract Manager	 Quality Control Reviewer	 Management Reviewer
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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### EVALUATION OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF VOCATIONAL SYSTEMS IN ACHIEVING THEIR PURPOSES

The State Council on Vocational Education conducts biennial evaluations of vocational education systems supported with federal funds. These systems include vocational schools, comprehensive high schools, community colleges, and community-based organizations. The 1987 evaluation, performed for the State Council by Abt Associates Inc., addresses three issues:

- What are the stated goals of vocational education in Massachusetts?
- How do state policymakers perceive vocational education and what are their goals for vocational education?
- In the view of local vocational education providers, which goals are important and how well are those goals implemented?

The first and second questions consider expectations for and about vocational education in Massachusetts as well as the commonality of those expectations, while the third explores the extent to which vocational education is deemed to be meeting its stated objectives.

A three-part study was designed to answer these questions. The first study task was a review of goals presented in a variety of documents including the Carl D. Perkins Vocational Education Act, Massachusetts Chapter 74, the State Plan for Vocational Education in Massachusetts, the Massachusetts Training and Employment Plan for the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA), the State Board of Education's Comprehensive Policy on Occupational Education, the Board's Policy Statement on Public School Youth, Education and Employment, and the Joint Policy on Occupational Education prepared by the State Board of Education and Board of Regents.

Interviews with state policymakers comprised the second part of the study. Thirteen state policymakers who influence policy and/or funding for vocational education were identified by the State Vocational Education Council. The list of interviewees was not all inclusive but representative of individuals who could play central roles. They were interviewed to obtain





their views of important vocational education goals and their recommendations for change to the existing vocational education system.

The third study task was a telephone survey of local providers of vocational education and professionals in related fields. Interviews were conducted with approximately fifty respondents in ten Massachusetts communities. The survey asked respondents to rank the importance of goals obtained from various documents and policymaker interviews and to indicate how well the Massachusetts vocational education system is meeting these goals. They were also asked to rank the importance of a series of system improvements.

To summarize, it was necessary to identify and list the goals of the Massachusetts vocational education system in order to evaluate the system in terms of its relative purposes. The views of policymakers were regarded as important because they might put forth additional goals. Also, policymaker perceptions of goal importance and achievement were reviewed to understand and explicate the extent of agreement between state policymakers and local providers. The goals statements in the local provider questionnaire were based on information obtained during the document review as well as on information drawn from state policymaker interviews.

It is important to point out an unusual feature of the evaluation described here. This study looks at perceptions of system-wide goal importance and attainment rather than effectiveness of individual programs. It is concerned with subjective assessments. It does not focus on so-called objective measures of program achievement such as student test scores or employer satisfaction.

Selected major findings of these inquiries are summarized below.

Review of Written Goals. The consideration of state and federal laws and regulations and state plans and policy statements produced the following results:

- A multiplicity of goals for vocational education. The goals, listed in these documents, can be categorized into five topical areas: student outcomes, equal access provisions, economic development, system improvement, and system coordination.





- A lack of established priorities for the multiple goals set forth by the various laws, plans, and policy statements.
- Only one comprehensive statement of goals--the State Plan for Vocational Education in Massachusetts. The plan is produced for federal compliance purposes and generally includes the goals of other state documents.
- Chapter 74 regulations briefly state student outcome goals but are mainly concerned with program approval criteria. Chapter 74 focuses primarily on the establishment, organization, and governance of vocational schools and programs. It also deals substantially with the certification of personnel.

Interviews with State Policymakers. Information obtained includes:

- Substantial agreement that, at the secondary school level, vocational education should concentrate on providing a comprehensive education, buttressed with career exploration and learning in work settings. All policymakers saw specific skills training as the most important goal of postsecondary vocational education, while skills training at the secondary level was given a mixed response.
- Noticeable differences in the emphasis on and proposed methods for increasing participation in the vocational education system by unserved or underserved groups. Half of the policymakers strongly criticized vocational education for serving too narrow a group and for not taking more affirmative steps, while the second half were less concerned with this issue or questioned the efficiency or consequences of targeting.
- Clear agreement that vocational education's primary role in economic development is adult retraining and skills upgrading.
- A lack of consensus on needed vocational education system improvement.
- Strong emphasis on the lack of and resulting need for state and local system coordination, particularly between vocational education and employment and training programs.

Local-Level Telephone Survey. Responses to the telephone survey include:

- Remarkable agreement on the importance of goals for both secondary and postsecondary education. In fact, four of the five goals ranked as most important for secondary



vocational education were also identified as four of the five most important goals for postsecondary education. These goals are: enhancing students' career decisionmaking; ensuring access to vocational education for unserved and underserved groups; providing hands-on learning for students; and teaching students specific occupational skills.

- Virtually complete consensus among respondents that, for both secondary and postsecondary vocational education, the Massachusetts vocational system is not achieving most of its stated goals. An exception to this finding is that between 60 and 70 percent of the local respondents felt that the Massachusetts secondary-level vocational education system achieves two goals: teaching students specific occupational skills and providing "hands-on" learning for students.
- Agreement between local respondents and state policymakers that secondary vocational education should provide students with a comprehensive education (ensuring basic skills).
- Local respondents were much more likely than state policymakers to see specific skills training as an important goal for secondary vocational education.
- Agreement among local respondents that postsecondary vocational education should provide students with specific occupational skills and create a skilled workforce.
- Clear consensus, unlike the disparate views expressed by state policymakers, on the importance of ensuring access to the vocational education system to a variety of special populations.
- A clustering of needed improvements for vocational education in Massachusetts. Between 85 and 90 percent of local respondents identified the following system improvements: coordination between vocational education and employment and training programs; stronger local linkages with other educational programs; increased funding; higher quality of professional staff development; and development of opportunities for students to have work-related experience.
- Agreement between state policymakers and local providers that system coordination is an important goal of and necessary improvement for the Massachusetts vocational education system. Local providers felt that state-level coordination was poorly achieved or not achieved at all.







